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STATE FOR OES (PDAS ROCK) AND NEA/REA (LAWSON)
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SUBJECT: IRAQ: ITALIAN MARSH RESTORATION TO ENTER

OPERATIONAL PHASE

REF: 04 ROME 1092

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11. (SBU) Summary: The Italian Ministry of Environment (MOE) plans to spend approximately euro 12 million through 2005 on its "New Eden" marshland restoration project in Iraq. In partnership with the Free Iraq Foundation, the GOI has funded a two-year scientific survey of the re-flooded Abu Zirig marsh near Nasiriyah, in addition to a feasibility study for providing marsh communities with better access to potable water. The GOI is now proceeding with a large "master plan" for water resource management in the marshland area. The MOE is also expected this year to fund the construction of water control structures to improve water flow through the marsh, the establishment of a model "green" marsh village, and the installation of 15-20 portable desalination plants to supply drinking water. End summary.

Background

12. (U) Since July 2003, the Italian Ministry of Environment and Territory (MOE) has funded the Free Iraq Foundation (a Washington, D.C.-based NGO) "New Eden" marshland restoration program (www.edenagain.org). So far, the GOI has disbursed euro 5.7 million (one euro=\$1.26) of the project's projected euro 12 million budget. (Note: There is some discrepancy within the GOI over how much Italy will contribute. MOE officials expect the GOI to contribute approximately euro 12 million, but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which tracks spending on all Iraq reconstruction projects, lists the project cost at just euro 10.5 million. End note.)

13. (U) "New Eden" involves three main projects: 1) the restoration of the Abu Zirig Marsh, including scientific monitoring and the eventual construction of water control structures to improve water flow; 2) a pilot project to provide marsh-area communities with potable drinking water, including construction of a model "green" marsh village; and 3) the compilation of a "master plan" to manage water resources in the marsh region.

14. (U) The total budget for the "New Eden" project is not yet finalized, but the approximate breakdown is as follows (all figures in millions of euros):

| | |
|--|------|
| Planning/assessment (completed)..... | 1.2 |
| Monitoring/feasibility study (completed)... | 0.9 |
| "Master plan" (start spring 05)..... | 3.6 |
| Control structures in Abu Zirig (late 05)... | 3.0* |
| Portable desalin/model village (late 05)... | 3.0* |

Total 11.7

*estimated cost. Work could begin in late 2005 or early 2006.

Restoration of the Abu Zirig Marsh

15. (U) Iraqi authorities commenced re-flooding of the Abu Zirig Marsh in June 2003, according to the Foundation. Presently, about 40 percent of the original marsh reportedly is once again underwater. The MOE and the Free Iraq Foundation identified the area as an ideal site to conduct scientific monitoring as the marsh was re-flooded. Project managers hope the resulting data will help engineers better manage the restoration of other Iraqi marshes. The GOI supplied scientific instruments and training to Iraqi engineers and scientists from the Iraqi Ministry of Water Resources (MOWR), the primary Iraqi partner for the Abu Zirig portion of "New Eden." Following a pattern used in other GOI-sponsored reconstruction efforts, the MOE conducted training in Italy for a half-dozen Iraqi scientists, who then conducted the actual field observations.

16. (SBU) While Italian experts traveled to Iraq during the initial stages of the project, such visits ended in 2004 in

reaction to a string of hostage takings involving Italian citizens. Augusto Pretner, a hydraulic engineer and the lead Italian expert on the New Eden project, told Econoff that the Iraqi teams working in and around Abu Zirig have encountered few security problems. Pretner said scientists involved in the project make a special effort to obtain permission from

local tribal leaders before venturing into the marsh. The monitoring teams also leave the marsh well before sundown. Pretner said the main security risks in the area come from economic-motivated banditry rather than insurgency-linked terrorism.

¶17. (U) After nearly two years of research in Abu Zirig, the scientists have concluded that the marsh is healthy overall, though some areas have recovered faster than others. Pretner noted that 50,000 people have returned to the area around Abu Zirig; fish have also returned in surprising numbers. The complete restoration of the marsh, he said, will depend on how Iraq, and other countries up-stream, manage the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and whether these up-stream countries will make enough water available to the marshlands. In April, the MOE and the Foundation presented a report of these conclusions to the United Nations.

¶18. (U) The MOE, the Foundation, and the MOWR are now discussing the next phase of the restoration, which involves the construction of water control structures at the inlet and outlet of the marsh. This infrastructure, according to Pretner, will help recreate the periodic flooding critical to maintaining the marsh ecosystem. Pretner stated that the MOE is awaiting a formal request from the Iraqi authorities, but is expecting to approve euro three million of GOI money toward construction of these structures.

Potable Water

¶19. (U) The second part of the "New Eden" project involves an assessment of drinking water needs in the area surrounding the Abu Zirig Marsh, a triangle formed by the towns of Nasiriyah, Qurna, and Zubayr. The Ministry of Public Works (MPW) is the primary Iraqi partner in this effort. According to the April 2005 report, 340,000 of the 2.6 million residents of this region lack access to any drinking water supply system. The water typically available to these communities is potable but often brackish. Providing adequate clean, desalinated drinking water to this population will require an investment of euro 335 million, the report says.

¶10. (U) The "New Eden" project also conducted a preliminary feasibility study of using natural gas from nearby oil wells to generate electricity to run desalination plants. Currently, this gas is flared as a waste product. Pretner said that it is unclear whether the quality and quantity of such waste gas is sufficient to generate power economically. Pretner told Econoff that the "New Eden" team had decided for the time being to generate electricity using conventional fuel.

¶11. (U) Based on the "New Eden" study, the Iraqi MPW is expected to present a proposal to the Italian MOE to install 15 to 20 small-scale desalination plants. These plants will be powered by portable generators. The Iraqi authorities, Pretner said, are also requesting funds to construct a model "green" marsh village that will incorporate modern water (and, presumably, wastewater) technology. Pretner said the MOE expects to approve the proposal and spend an additional euro three million on the portable desalination units and the model village.

Water Resource "Master Plan"

¶12. (SBU) Parallel to these other efforts, "New Eden" experts (which include a team of hydraulic engineers from the U.S., Italy, and Iraq) are compiling a euro 3.6 million "master plan" for water resource management in the marshlands area. The finished product will include a comprehensive survey of water resources in the region and a detailed plan for managing the reflooding of all Iraq marshes, including reconstruction of ditches and channels that historically have linked the marshes together into one system. The MOE's goal in funding the master plan is to avoid further environmental damage to Iraq's marshes due to haphazard and unplanned reflooding. Pretner said that Iraqi officials were very pleased with the work so far and may enlist the Free Iraq Foundation to do a similar water resource plan for the whole of Iraq.

Comment

¶13. (SBU) Pretner expressed the hope that "New Eden" could further improve coordination with USAID-sponsored marsh restoration projects. As Pretner candidly told us last year, the New Eden project was conceived both to help the Marsh Arab population and to create opportunities in Iraq for Italian hydro engineering companies. These commercial considerations, however, have apparently fallen by the wayside, as ongoing security concerns have dampened Italian private-sector interest in reconstruction work. As with other Italian assistance projects in Iraq, the GOI emphasizes the high level of Iraqi participation, which both builds Iraqi capacity and allows Italy to manage these programs from a distance. (The MFA, we have heard, still strongly discourages travel to Iraq by Italian officials and private citizens alike.)

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